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ABSTRACT

A study of the use of "proteksia," a system of securing personal influence in Israel, is discussed in this article and is related to concepts of intercultural ethics. The information on the study is taken from an article "On Proteksia," by B. Danet and H. Hartman, focusing on "proteksia" as it relates to bureaucratic norms and nonbureaucratic behavior. "Proteksia" is defined as the manipulation of role impingements to obtain benefits or services that might otherwise not be forthcoming. A survey of persons in Israel is cited that found that in spite of a negative attitude toward "proteksia," a majority of people felt the need for it, and a high percentage of them reported using "proteksia" during the prior year. Similar uses of both the word and the practice of "proteksia" are noted as existing in Poland, Yugoslavia, and Russia, and similar meanings and practices are noted as they occur in Bulgaria, Iran, Arab countries, Turkey and North America. Descriptive studies such as the one cited are advocated as necessary precursors to prescriptive ethics in the study of communication ethics. (MKM)

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Ethics and Intercultural Communication

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Ethics and Intercultural Communication

While conducting interviews with social scientists in Israel on the role of ethnicity in communication, I was referred to an article on proteksia.[1] Essentially, the term means the use of personal influence to secure a desired end. The article reports findings from a survey of 1,885 Israelis on their attitude toward and use of proteksia in dealing with bureaucracy. One concern of the survey is the ethical implication involved. Viewed in a broader context, this study by Danet and Hartman adds to the literature on intercultural ethics in two ways: It gives insight into a prevailing code in another culture, and it reveals some of the complexity that arises from Israel's multi-ethnic composition where matters of ethics enter. The research is worthy of consideration in that it helps to rectify the dearth of studies of other communication ethics that Asuncion-Landé cites.[2] If there is need for further justification, the recent Billy Carter-Libya incident testifies to the growing concern in this country for the interpersonal interplay of ethics in international relationships.

It is my intention to extract from "On Proteksia" material that is relevant for intercultural communication. The article appeared in the Journal of Comparative Administration; it focused on bureaucratic norms and nonbureaucratic behavior. My exploration of the key concept will begin with an explanation of what it is and how it functions. Only research aspects pertinent to intercultural ethics will be drawn for analysis from the study. A brief

survey will be made of the comparative use of the term, then attention will be focused on the concept in terms of current theoretical approaches.

The system of proteksia that Danet and Hartman explore has been defined as a method of securing personal influence. Sociologists might see it as "the manipulation of role impingements to obtain benefits or services which might otherwise not be forthcoming."[3] It may involve two parties: one person asking a friend to intercede in some matter on his behalf; or it may involve a third party, namely, an intermediary who requests the favor from the influential third party. The example cited has a distinctly western ring:

> Suppose a man wants to get his son into a certain college, and his son is not quite so good a student as this college generally accepts. The admissions policy of the college stipulates that new students are to be admitted on merit alone. The man happens to know the dean of this college personally. He has a chat with him, and the dean sees to it that the boy is accepted.[4]

An example that is closer to the Israeli scene might be a situation in which party A acts as an intermediary by approaching an influential personal friend, B, to request that he consider hiring someone known and/or related to A for an open position. If party B does indeed hire A's candidate, it will be A who incurs an implicit debt. As the authors state, "Having someone to ask for a favor implies the ability to repay the favor in some way."[5] These "proteksia credits" may be said to exist among people whose social or political status is equal or among unequals. Proteksia may also be used on a more impersonal and political level, in which case there is an

obligation to politically support policy or candidates at a later date.

As indicated, the Danet and Hartman study was concerned with the extent to which nonbureaucratic norms and behavior are being institutionalized in Israel. Interpretation of proteksia as an ongoing ethical concept is this author's not the investigators' perspective. However, their findings that both bureaucratic norms and nonbureaucratic behavior are simultaneously being institutionalized do not disallow an intercultural exploration of personal influence. A brief review of their hypotheses reveals four levels:

attitude toward proteksia: that the more adapted (socialized) people were to bureaucracy, the more they would disapprove of the practice.

access to proteksia: that people with high education and socio-economic status would have greatest access to those able to reward others.

need for proteksia: 1) that those who brought the practice with them to Israel would be quick to use it.

2) that those on the low end of status (because of discrimination problems, ignorance of bureaucratic methods, or North African origin) may be more in need of proteksia as well as more accustomed to it.

use of proteksia: that the more socialized people become, the less likely they are to use it because they disapprove of it.

The results of their survey supported the first two hypotheses. In spite of the negative attitude, findings showed that a majority felt the need for proteksia (with weak differences depending upon ethnic origin.) Even more surprising was the high percentage of people who reported using proteksia within the past year. Danet and Hartman were particularly interested in the ethnic breakdown; I am more concerned with the overall message: Israelis disapprove of the practice, but admit to using it. They use it in conjunction with rather than instead of bureaucratic channels, and often after a negative contact.[6] Sixty-five per cent revealed that they believed others use proteksia most of the time in bureaucratic dealings.

It is not the purpose of this paper to explore the ethnicity aspect of proteksia that reappears frequently in the study. However, some comment should be made regarding the ethnic source of the word, and the extent of its use - geographic and cultural. Danet and Hartman state that both the word and the behavior it manifests were brought to Israel by immigrants from Eastern Europe early in the twentieth century. This may be so; indeed, the concept is still used, exactly as described, in Poland. But this is also true for all three languages in Yugoslavia. A popular Serbo-Croatian play, Proteksia, is still performed; it was written late in the nineteenth century.[7]

In Russia, the same word is used. But moving toward the Balkans, we find that in Bulgarian, which in many ways is similar to the Russian language, the word vruski, meaning strings, is used. The reference, obviously, is to pulling strings, which has its counter-

part in English as well. In both Russia and Bulgaria, the use of personal influence in the highly bureaucratic socialist milieu functions in diverse ways. The population, composed of many ethnic groups, is a heterogeneous one. Personal interaction forms an important, complex network. The "favors" extended may be in the form of commodities sought as well as privileges desired.[8] The result of this system is an intricate, unwritten yet mutually understood ledger of who owes whom a favor; it is an ethical balance sheet.

If the term originated in Eastern Europe, it has spread surprisingly far. In Iran, in Farsi, the word parti /partí/ is used in exactly the same way as proteksia;[9] and in the Arab world there seems to be several equivalents. At this writing, wastah /WAZtaa/ comes closest, though this term presumes a third party operating.[10] Further research is needed, particularly for variations in the Arabic that is spoken in different Muslim nations, and also to account for the differences between written and oral vocabulary.

This cursory terminology survey raises more questions than it answers. It is not clear how culturally distinctive proteksia is - or has been in the past. It would seem to be older than the early twentieth century, as Danet and Hartman claim. And it seems to be widely used in countries that certainly do not fit under the Eastern European rubric. Hence, there is doubt regarding its Eastern European origin. A Turkish national has posited the idea that proteksia as a practice is pre-Suleiman, and was spread from Turkey as the Ottoman empire expanded.[11] Perhaps this is an instance where

a study of descriptive ethics would lead to further linguistic advances.

Brembeck and Howell's chapter on the ethical dimension of persuasion in Persuasion: A Means of Social Influence, provides excellent guidelines for examining ethics in an intercultural light. The distinction they make between descriptive and prescriptive ethics is an important one. The former focuses on what is and has been done in a culture. Their rationale is that understanding the status quo is helpful in formulating improvements, the prescriptive aspect. As they state:

> We believe that the pragmatics of ethics have been neglected and that this omission can be corrected only by devoting much more time and effort to descriptive studies.[12]

An ethics profile is a necessary precursor to prescriptive ethics. The information in Danet and Hartman's study does just that. It shows that proteksia is used to assert personal influence; it has and does prevail in Israel, though there are ethnic differences toward it. In general, the attitude of the people is that it is undesirable in their ethical code. We North Americans have also tended to deprecate such a practice, and to deny it moral acceptance while admitting its existence in our society. We refer to "having connections" in order to convey what proteksia covers in some countries.

In scrutinizing communication ethics we would do well to consider Wieman and Walter's attitude toward ethical standards;

"communication is ethical to the degree that it enhances human symbol-using capacity, fulfills the need for mutual appreciative understanding, and promotes mutuality of control and influence."[13] Such communication demands prime consideration of what benefits humanity. Brembeck and Howell have posited social utility as a guide to ethical persuasion. This concept can be applied to intercultural communication ethics. In fact, the authors state that it is multi-cultural in that it is responsive to the values of the community where the persuasion takes place. Referring back to the theoretical schema, if party A

1) makes a conscious effort to understand the common interests of the group to which he belongs,
2) understands the ways his influence helps or hurts the group, and
3) understands the favorable and adverse effects of his influence on the individuals concerned,[14]

his approach to party B will yield a high degree of social utility, and be the first step toward being ethical.

This concept fits well with Howell's more recent work on ethics in which he compares the relationship of ethics and culture to an intricately woven fabric that must be carefully handled. "Whatever tears or strains the fabric is unethical."[15] In other words, we must consider the effect of our influence in the cultural context in which we act. Brembeck and Howell applaud the growing concern of scholars with the ethical dimensions of influence in communication. I join them and countless others in urging that a comprehensive and methodical survey

of ethical principles at work in other cultures be undertaken. Only when this descriptive phase has been completed can we begin to formulate a unified, coherent approach to prescriptive ethics. As Georg Simmel so cogently noted, "all contacts among men rise on the schema of giving and returning the equivalence."[16] Proteksia is but one facet of this vast schema.

Notes

1 Brenda Danet and Harriet Hartman, "On Proteksia," Journal of Comparative Administration (February 1972), 405-434.

2 Nobleza C. Asuncion-Landé, ea., Ethical Perspectives and Critical Issues in Intercultural Communication (Falls Church, Va.: SCA) no date given

3 Danet and Hartman. Ibid., p. 406.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., p. 427.

7 Private communication with Professor Nenad Popovic, June 1980.

8 Private communication with Professor Bistrakapka Genova, June 1980.

9 Private communication with Dean John McCombe, March 1980.

10 Arabic speaking informants from the Syracuse area.

11 Private communication with Professor Ara Volkan, February 1980.

12 Winston L. Brembeck and William S. Howell, Persuasion: A Means of Social Influence (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1976), p. 232.

13 Henry N. Wieman and Otis M. Walter, "Toward an Analysis of Ethics for Rhetoric" discussed in Richard L. Johannsen, Ethics in Human Interaction (Columbus, Ohio, Charles E. Merrill, 1975), p. 34.

14 Brembeck and Howell, p. 245.

15 William S. Howell, "Foreword" in Ethical Perspectives and Critical Issues in Intercultural Communication, op. cit., p. ix.

16 Kurt H. Wolff, (trans. and ed.) Simmel, Georg, The Sociology of Georg Simmel (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950), p. 387.